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## ABSTRACT

Analysis of school documents, teacher and principal interviews, and teacher conflicts in an elementary school uncovered both an explicit rule structure fostering a desired school image and a series of implicit rules accepted by the faculty but at times contradicting the organizational image. Established master contract guidelines featured (1) care and concern for children, (2) high quality teachers, (3) cooperation and collaboration among staff, (4) open and flexible communication, and (5) teacher ability to manage and resolve conflicts. Factors such as the principal's view of the conflict, the history of the school, and power relationships between the principal and teachers and among teachers themselves, however, influenced the development of implicit rules. The following are among those rules: if an unresolved conflict is too petty to take to the principal, teachers must manage it by whatever means are effective as long as the principal is not involved; and teachers in poor standing should not take a major problem to the principal. Results indicated the effectiveness of a communication based rules approach to organizational culture, expanded the definition of a master rules contract to include implicit rules, and contributed to the understanding of rule emergence. (MM)

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Teacher Conflicts: A Study of Rule Emergence

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### ABSTRACT

Building on Harris and Cronen's theoretical model of rules analysis in organizations, the researcher gathered qualitative data about conflict-related rules of teachers in a public school setting. Comparison of actual behavior with the rules articulated by teachers indicates that, while the model uncovers explicit rules, it fails to account for implicit rules which circumvent those explicit rules, are tacitly shared, and actually guide behavior. After examining three factors which underlie the emergence of implicit conflict-related rules, the researcher presents the behavioral choices participants face in conflict which cannot be managed using the explicit rules. Alternative rules which participants invoke are elaborated and implications considered.

As communication scholars have become more involved in research and consultation in the area of organizational communication, there has been a move away from the traditional emphasis on providing causal links between communication variables and organizational outcomes and a shift toward description and interpretation of the communicative complexities of organizational events.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to explore organizational life from a more communicatively-based interpretive perspective, researchers are increasingly adopting the anthropologically-based concept of "culture" and studying "the sum total of ways of living, organizing, and communicating built up in a group of human beings . . . ."<sup>2</sup> From a cultural perspective, communication in the organization is viewed not simply as a variable which occurs within some objective, external reality called "the organization," but instead is constitutive of the organization itself.

Since knowledge of an organizational culture yields insight into the functioning of the organization, and since an organizational culture is created through the day-to-day communication of its participants, in order to fully understand an organization's ways of living, organizing, and communicating, the researcher must engage in an in-depth analysis of those processes through which participants define their relationships and co-create their organizational culture. By analyzing specific observable communication behaviors we can identify the rules which participants use to organize their lines of action with one another. According to Hawes:

If we are to understand how social collectivities are created, maintained, and dissolved, we must infer from data the rules by which those social collectivities operate. Communicative behavior is easily accessible,

is easily recordable and definable, and can function as the primary data from which operational rules of social collectivities can be inferred.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, because of its attention to the ways in which participants organize and negotiate the everyday interactions which constitute their cultures, a rules-based approach is an effective method for understanding the culture which is created in their organizational setting.

Although rules-based research would provide valuable analytic description and would facilitate the much-needed development of a solid theoretical base from which to conduct fruitful organizational research, few communication studies have used a rules-based approach to study organizations.<sup>4</sup> In the few existing organizational rules studies, theoretical and methodological inadequacies have resulted in a failure to get beneath the surface manifestations of the organizational culture. Thus, though some rules have been elaborated, the complexity inherent in organizational rules-structures has been neglected.

In an effort to uncover such complexities inherent in organizational rules-structures, the present study focuses upon the rules-structure involved in teacher conflicts in an elementary school setting. Since studying the rules-structure operating in all aspects of an organizational culture would be cumbersome, a more microscopic focus on one particular type of interaction in a specific kind of organization allows for a richer level of description and analysis.

Conflict was chosen as the phenomenon to be studied for three reasons. First, conflict, defined by Hocker and Wilmot as "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties, who perceive incompatible

goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals," is a pervasive element in human interactions.<sup>5</sup> Since an interpretive stance requires first-hand experience with the ways in which actors create conjoint meanings and actions,<sup>6</sup> it becomes necessary to select a communicative process which occurs frequently enough that it can be observed in participants' everyday interactions. Because conflict is inevitable, it will occur in any organizational setting.

Secondly, an exploration of the unique nature of the relationship between conflict and rules might enhance our understanding of both the role of communication in conflict interactions and of the nature of rules. If the complexities of the rules which constitute an organization as a culture are to be discerned, then the organization must be studied in communicative contexts which maximize the detection of those rules. Conflict defines one such context. Because conflict often is rooted in rule violation or disagreement about rules, latent, but relevant rules may be activated in conflict situations. Examining these latent rules and the processes by which the rules evolve and are enacted results in greater insight into participants' interactions.

Finally, since most studies of conflict are quantitative attempts to measure the amount and sources of conflict in laboratory settings or in organizations,<sup>7</sup> we have little knowledge of how conflict interactions actually occur in everyday life. Studying conflict from a rules-based perspective enables the researcher to apply qualitative methods which yield in-depth descriptive data. By elaborating the rules governing conflict behavior we can see how those rules reflect the basic assumptions and values underlying the organizational culture and thus can arrive at a fuller

understanding of the process of communicative conflict and of the organizational culture itself.

The researcher's original intent was to build on the contribution to rules-based research made by Harris and Cronen in their conceptualization of the "master contract."<sup>8</sup> According to Harris and Cronen, events in a specific organization can be understood in terms of the interrelationships between the two components of the organization's master contract: 1) the image--the organization's self-definition which consists of the constructs, beliefs and ideal goals states which define the collectivity, and 2) the rules--the elaboration of the image into organized ways of knowing and behaving. The authors suggest that it is through coorientation of members to the master contract and through coordination of their specific everyday behaviors that organizations achieve optimal functioning. Based on this theoretical framework, the researcher gathered qualitative data for the purpose of deriving the conflict-related rules-structure of the organization being studied.

During the data analysis phase, however, it became evident that, while Harris and Cronen's model allows the researcher to extrapolate and elaborate rules which clearly fit the widely-accepted and explicitly-stated organizational image, it does not take into consideration the presence of implicit rules. We can define an organization's implicit rules as those rules which are tacitly known and shared by the participants, but which may not be congruent with the organizational image and thus would not be articulated as part of the organization's master contract. These implicit rules may, in fact, be in opposition to the explicit rules which function to establish guidelines for appropriate behavior within the constraints of

the organizational image. It became apparent through observations of teachers' behaviors that in this organization it is the implicit rules which guide much of the participants' actual behavior. Thus, knowing only the explicitly-stated master contract rules derived from the articulated organizational image may mislead the researcher or consultant. A fuller understanding of an organization's rules-structure would take account of the discrepancy between its implicit rules evidenced in participants' behavior and its explicit rules derived through examination of the image as verbalized by participants. In addition, an attempt would be made to determine the source of the difference.<sup>9</sup> With this realization, the researcher's task became one of uncovering both types of rules and of examining the processes through which these rules came into existence.

### Methodology

Having previously gathered data on teacher-student interactions in this particular school, the researcher had come to know the principal and several of the teachers well enough that gaining entry for research on teacher-teacher communication processes was not problematic. In an attempt to determine the master contract of this elementary school organization and to develop hypotheses specifically about its conflict-related rules, intensive interviews were conducted with the school's principal and with seven of the eleven full-time teachers. The interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes, and were taped and transcribed. Questions were designed to explore the organizational image, the ways in which teacher conflicts are handled, the process of third-party intervention, sanctions imposed or received subsequent to conflict-related behavior, and specific conflicts which

had actually occurred within the past two to three months. Since the initial research task was to derive a structure of explicit master contract rules in this school organization, data relevant to the organizational image was analyzed using the steps outlined by Harris and Cronen. This analysis involved two steps: 1) extrapolating remarks relevant to understanding the organizational image, and 2) deriving from the participants' comments the particular elements of this image which could be translated into rules prescribing how conflict should be managed.

In establishing rule-existence and in elaborating rules, the researcher relied on Shimanoff's conceptualization of a rule as "a followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred or prohibited in certain contexts."<sup>10</sup> Shimanoff posits that, while obligated and prohibited rules exert stronger prescriptive force than preferential rules do, in order to claim that any behavior is rule-generated the criteria of controllability, criticizability, and contextuality must be met. For a behavior to be controllable, the actor must physically be able to perform or not perform the behavior and must be able to choose whether or not to perform the behavior. To be criticizable, the behavior must be open to evaluation. To meet the criteria of contextuality, the rule-generated behavior must occur consistently in similar situations. While the claims of controllability and contextuality are easier to establish, demonstrating the claim of criticizability requires drawing upon three types of evidence: participants' ability to judge what is appropriate or inappropriate in a given context, the existence of negative sanctions in response to rule violations, and the presence of repairs (efforts to preempt, eliminate or fix a source of communication difficulty).<sup>11</sup> While all three forms of

evidence need not be present to establish criticizability, they must interact with the other criteria in specified ways to establish rule-existence. Based on the criteria of controllability, criticizability, and contextuality, once a rule is identified it is stated in an "if . . . then . . ." format in which the "if" phrase offers the scope conditions (context in which the rule applies), and the "then" phrase explains the nature of the prescription (prohibited, obligated, or preferred) and the behavior required to enact the rule.<sup>12</sup>

After elaborating a preliminary structure of this organization's explicit master contract rules, the next step was to observe actual conflicts. In addition to observing conflict between individual teachers, the researcher attended two faculty meetings which had been identified by teachers as potentially conflictual, and then conducted follow-up discussion with previously interviewed teachers. In addition, an influential document produced in 1974 by two consultants to this school was analyzed to discern its relevance to the school's present rules. Based on the interview data, document analysis, and observations of significant discrepancies between the explicit master contract rules and actual teacher conflict behavior in both one-to-one and group contexts, the presence of implicit rules which serve the function of circumventing the master contract rules became evident. After elaborating these implicit rules, the researcher asked the teachers who had previously been interviewed to judge the validity of the final rules structure in order to determine whether or not that rules-structure "made sense" to the participants.<sup>13</sup> Upon establishing verification that these implicit rules are, in fact, accepted by the faculty, but not an acceptable part of the organizational image, conclusions were drawn and implications considered.

## Results and Discussion

Since, according to Harris and Cronen, the organization's rules are "an elaboration of the image into a guide for how to enact obedience in the situation . . . ,"<sup>14</sup> the image articulated by the organization's members was used to extrapolate those rules. During the initial interviews conducted with the principal and teachers several components of a widely-accepted organizational image emerged: caring and concern for children, high quality of teachers, cooperation and collaboration, open and flexible communication, and an ability to manage conflicts. In the following section, each of these elements of this organization's image will be presented and will be described by means of exemplary participants' comments, after which the related obligatory rule related to those comments will be stated.

### The Master Contract Rules

The first two master contract rules are rules about fulfilling the role of teacher. These do not function directly as prescriptions for how to engage in conflict. However, because the stated rules are ambiguous and open to a wide variety of interpretations, perceived violations of these rules, as well as misunderstanding or disagreements over how the rules should be enacted may, and in fact do, create conflict between teachers.

#### I. Caring and concern for children

Principal: Why are we here? I'm not here for the teachers. The teachers are not here for me. The teachers are not here for themselves, but for the kids. The major thrust in this building is kids.

Teacher: We really care about kids--not just our own kids but all the kids in school.

Teacher: I sometimes have conflicts with the specialists (art, music, and PE teachers) because their programs interfere with my educational program and therefore with the kids' welfare.

R-1: If you are a teacher/principal in this school, the educational and personal welfare of students must be your highest priority.

## II. High quality of teachers

Teacher: Teachers here are creative. They don't just use their old lesson plans.

Teacher: People here are competent. They are here by choice. They could "make it" someplace else.

R-2: If you are a teacher in this school, you must exhibit a high level of competence and creativity.

A second cluster of master contract rules relates more directly to the enactment of conflict. The function of these rules is to define the interpersonal relationships between staff members.

## III. Cooperation and collaboration

Principal: When there's a problem with budget . . . well, every year the upper grades will give the primary some of their funds.

Teacher: If another teacher comes to me for help, I always help them right away. They're cooperative with me. That makes it easier to work out conflicts when they arise.

R-3: If you are a teacher/principal in this school, you must cooperate and collaborate with others.

## IV. Open and flexible communication

Principal: One major criteria for a principal is communication skills. You can't get upset if everything doesn't go the way you think it should . . . . We look for people who are flexible and can live in this type of school.

Teacher: We need to get it all out and look at it.  
I don't think anyone is too thin-skinned.

R-4: If you are a teacher/principal in this school, you must exhibit open and flexible communicative behaviors.

#### V. Teachers' ability to manage conflicts

Teacher: It's an exceptional faculty. We all get along. Everyone sort of does their own thing. We don't infringe on other people and everyone works out their own problems. It's better to work it out on an adult level rather than a boss-employee level.

Principal: I've tried to encourage the teachers if there is a conflict . . . to sit down between the two of them . . . I try to let the teachers handle it and not try to work in the middle of it . . . I don't like to be there at all, especially with two adults--professional teachers . . . I say "Hey, this is childish . . . ."

Teacher: Teachers generally work out their problems themselves. That's the way he (principal) wants it.

R-5: If two teachers are in conflict, they must manage the conflict themselves in a "mature" rather than a "childish" manner.

Rules 3-5 delineate guidelines which one might expect would be applied to the specific communicative task of managing conflicts. Based on these rules, when conflict arises between two teachers, they should be able to manage the conflict themselves in a "mature," open, cooperative manner. This is, in fact, the case in some of the teacher conflicts examined. Two conflict-related rules follow logically from these rules about teachers' roles and interpersonal relationships:

R-6: If a conflict with another teacher arises, one or both of the involved teachers should initiate an attempt to work out the conflict.

R-7: If the conflict has not been managed satisfactorily after the first attempt, several more attempts should be made by one or both of the involved teachers.

These rules, readily articulated by the teachers, do, in general, govern the behavior of teachers in this school when they initially encounter a problem with another teacher. For example, two teachers described separate situations in which excessive noise from an adjoining class created conflict between the parties involved. Both teachers indicated that they had made more than one attempt to work out the problems with the other teacher, and had been successful.

#### Development of Implicit Rules

If teachers perceive that invoking Rules 6 and 7 has not resulted in successful management of their conflict, it is of particular interest to note what happens to the master contract rules of cooperation, openness, and restricting the conflict to only the involved parties. Close examination of the actual behaviors of members of this school organization indicates that Rules 3-5, derived from the image articulated by teachers, often are circumvented or ignored.

For example, in one particular conflict observed, two teachers with a history of difficulties were arguing, apparently for the third time, about when the task of separating supplies should be completed. While one wanted to do the job immediately, the other stated her preference to wait until a designated "work day" in January. After some discussion, the teacher who was anxious to accomplish the task abruptly turned around, enlisted the help of her student teacher, stomped over to the cabinet, tight-lipped and tense, and emphatically began separating the supplies. The other teacher ignored all of these nonverbal behaviors. When asked by the researcher to describe the conflict, the second teacher stated that she was somewhat

amused by the sight of this teacher and her student teacher sitting on the floor sorting out construction paper. In addition, she remarked that she often ignores and avoids this teacher.

Clearly, when Rules 6 and 7 yield unsatisfactory results, teachers turn to a quite different set of behaviors to manage their conflicts. Because the conflict-related rules which are part of the organization's master contract are inadequate to take account of situations where participants fail to easily work out their conflicts according to Rules 3-5, teachers have developed a series of alternative behavioral guidelines for those situations where the image-related rules fail.

The crucial question about these behaviors centers around whether they are simply tactical rule violations aimed at getting around the master contract or whether, in fact, the alternative behaviors themselves are rule-guided. In a recent study of changes in relationship definitions in initial short-term dyadic encounters, Rushing discusses how rule violations may function as tactics to give participants power advantages.<sup>15</sup> These tactical behaviors are neither prescriptive nor do they exhibit any pattern of behavioral regularity which would indicate they are rule-generated. In the present study, however, it is apparent that regularities do exist in teachers' conflict-behavior when adherence to R-6 and R-7 has not yielded results. Close examination of these behavioral regularities indicates that they are rule-related because they are controllable, criticizable and contextual, and because they exhibit prescriptive force. Though the rules are not articulated as part of the organization's master contract, teachers indicate a knowledge of which behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate in given context. In addition, the existence of negative

sanctions and the tendency of teachers to comply with the rules in order to avoid those sanctions provide conclusive evidence that what these teachers have developed are rules for how to violate the explicit master contract rules. Because the behavior resulting from following these rules is not acceptable in this organization, the rules must remain tacit. Before elaborating these implicit rules, it is important to understand the forces which give rise to their existence.

In analyzing transcripts of taped interviews, conducting observations of conflicts and of teachers' meetings, and completing follow-up interviews with participants, it became apparent that three closely-related influences play a significant role in the conflict-related behavior of members of this organization: 1) the principal's view of conflict; 2) the history of the school; and 3) the power relationships between the principal and teachers and among teachers themselves.

The first factor which influences members' behavior is the leader's attitude about conflict itself. Because the way in which one views conflict directly impacts the way that conflict is managed, it is important to understand how conflict is viewed by key people in this organization. Hocker and Wilmot posit that many people in our society have misconceptions about conflict which lead them to believe that it is abnormal, pathological, or due to personality problems.<sup>16</sup> Simons contends that one of our common teachings about conflict reflects a view that protects already-established systems--what is good for the existing structure is good for the individual.<sup>17</sup> Hocker and Wilmot further suggest that:

Many of us have been taught to be polite, patient and non-threatening because rude, impatient and threatening

behaviors are usually disruptive to those in power . . . .

Conflict is suppressed because it threatens the very structure of the system.<sup>18</sup>

Though research which points out the normalcy and positive value of conflict abounds, many organizational participants are unaware of the adaptive function of conflict.<sup>19</sup> Such is the case of the leader of this organization. The existence of the principal's view of conflict as dysfunctional and unpleasant is evident from remarks made by him and by the teachers:

Principal: There's lots of cooperation here which creates good feelings and helps keep a lot of conflict away . . . I feel a little embarrassed being in that position (dealing with teacher conflicts) and I tell them that--that this is not the role I want to play as principal.

Teacher: If we would go talk to him about our problems he would ramble off into the wild blue yonder. He doesn't want anything to do with conflict.

In addition, observations made at a faculty meeting indicate that this negative view of conflict leads to avoidance of potential conflict and thus subverts the master contract rule of open and flexible communication. When each teacher was asked individually at a faculty meeting for his/her opinion regarding a school problem, the majority of teachers refrained from voicing any strong opinion, though several of the teachers prior to the meeting had expressed to the researcher a strong preference about the outcome. Instead, during the meeting most teachers discussed how they were able to understand all points of view and "could live with" any decision made by the group or the principal, thus avoiding dealing openly with a potential conflict. After the meeting two teachers indicated to the researcher their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the discussion.

A second influential factor is the history of the school. The principal refers to the time when he took over leadership of the school-- a time of great turmoil. He notes that, prior to his arrival, the school had experienced a major "shake-up" during which time the principal was "demoted" to classroom teacher and several teachers were forced to leave the building. Four of the seven teachers interviewed in this study were working in the school at the time, and shared with the researcher a document generated by a team of consultants as a result of the 1974 "shake-up." An analysis of this document sheds some light on the possible origin of the organization's present master contract.<sup>20</sup>

In identifying the problems which existed in 1974, teachers named trust, problem-solving adequacy, conflict, and power equalization as four of the top five difficulties. The "problem-solving task force," composed of four teachers, outlined at that time a number of desirable procedures for managing interpersonal conflict between teachers or between a teacher and the principal. These procedures included going directly to the involved party in an open and straightforward manner and trying more than one time to resolve the conflict. The recommendations of the consultants included specific guidelines for selecting a new principal who would be able to recreate a productive school environment.

It is clear that the current master contract is directly related to the outcome of the 1974 crisis. The guidelines the task force suggested for dealing with conflict are the same steps outlined in the present-day master contract. In addition, the principal and teachers indicate that the principal wants to maintain stability and peace in the school, conditions which reflect the consultants' recommendations. The principal states that

he views any problems between teachers as potential problems for himself as an administrator. Thus, based on the organization's history, the existence of conflict in the school may represent a threat to the principal personally and to the organization as a whole.

A third and final factor contributing to deviation from the master contract rules relates to the power relationships between the principal and teachers and among the teachers themselves. According to Emerson, the relative power of participants in an interaction is directly related to the dependence of the parties on one another for goal satisfaction <sup>21</sup> By nature of his position the principal has considerable power. His power resides in the fact that he may reassign teachers to a different job within the school or transfer them to another building. Teachers are aware that they depend on the principal to maintain their job in this school. Their references to the 1974 "shake-up" indicate that the legendary crisis remains strong in their minds. Two of them explicitly state their desire to stay in this particular environment rather than be transferred to another school. Because of the principal's specified role and because of the teacher's dependence on him to mediate their goal of job stability, the principal has considerable power relative to the teachers. Those who fail to remain in his good graces may jeopardize their position:

Teacher: (re, a teacher who is generally acknowledged to have difficulties with the principal) She used the district rule to force him to make an early decision. She does those things to him and so he does those things to her (assigns her to a different grade level) . . . he doesn't like her at all.

Although the principal seldom makes mention of his power, the following comments he made during an interview indicate he is fully aware of that power:

Principal: (in a conflict) if we have to go outside the building (for mediation) we will . . . keeping in mind that the ultimate is always a transfer. It's a fact of life . . . I can't have a teacher in a team-teaching situation who can't get along . . . . If I'm aware of a conflict I will go to the person and say, "You're going to level with me." I lay it on the line. "If we can't resolve (your conflict) then you will be needing to look . . . I will need to go to the superintendent and try to find you a different position."

The teachers, too, are aware of the principal's power. Yet, instead of openly acknowledging it, the principal and teachers have conjointly developed an image and set of explicit rules which speak of equality and democracy in the system. It is rarely explicitly stated that a power differential exists. In fact, the very presence of power or of a power differential is denied by the teachers in their remarks.

Teacher: (The principal) does like me, but I don't want to feel that I have power. I want him to like and respect me, but I don't want power.

Teacher: I go in to speak to the principal, not wanting any reaction from him, but just to speak to him as a peer.

Though the participants deny or minimize the relevance of power in their interactions, power is, in fact, a most relevant construct here, particularly in situations where conflict arises. Hocker and Wilmot contend that "power is necessary to move a conflict along to some kind of productive management . . . . Power is central to the study of conflict and can be used for productive or destructive ends, but it is always present."<sup>22</sup> Thus, power exists both in the relationships between the principal and teachers and between teachers themselves as they engage in conflict.

The master contract rules of cooperation, openness and "mature" management of conflict, however, do not take into account the existence of power. Since adherence to the master contract is required to stay in the principal's favor and to maintain one's position, and since power in conflict situations is denied by that master contract, teachers have had to develop additional rules which enable them to function in this setting and to take account of power within the system without explicitly acknowledging that power. These additional rules allow them to recognize and deal more directly with the realities of power in conflict, and, at the same time, help them to maintain some power base with the principal so that they will be less vulnerable to transfer or dismissal.

Given the three significant influences upon teacher and principal behavior outlined above, we can now elaborate and understand the implicit rules that explain what actually happens in many conflict situations in this particular school.

#### Implicit Rules-Structure

Since rules function to reduce uncertainty and to provide guidelines for individuals' behavior, when the rules governing a particular situation are inadequate or impractical, participants must create alternative rules which will serve those functions. Since the master contract rules in this school do not enable participants to manage many of their conflicts, teachers have developed an alternative set of implicit rules which take account of the principal's negative attitude toward conflict, the school's history, and the power relationships between the principal and teachers and between teachers themselves. These implicit rules offer

specific guidelines for teachers' conflict behavior when the master contract rules have failed.

In such situations, teachers are faced with three strategic choices: whether or not the principal should be informed of the conflict, who should inform him, and what behaviors should be exhibited in his presence. Teachers' knowledge of the implicit rules facilitates the making of these behavioral choices.

The first choice teachers face is whether or not to inform the principal that a conflict exists. Since it is widely-acknowledged in the school that the principal wants to avoid conflict, only problems perceived to be of "major concern" are taken to him after unsuccessful attempts by teachers to manage the conflict. "Petty" problems are dealt with in other ways by the teachers. Evidence of this exists in the example given of the two teachers conflicting over the school supplies and in the following remarks from teachers:

Teacher: I try not to bother him it it's not an important, big problem.

Teacher: If I did go to him often, he'd begin to think I was a big pain in the neck.

If the problem is perceived by the teachers to be "too petty" to take to the principal, yet they have not been successful in resolving it through the use of R-6 and R-7, the following rule, widely-accepted by the teachers as obligated behavior, is invoked:

R-8: If two teachers are unable to resolve a conflict using R-6 and R-7, and if the conflict is "too petty" to take to the principal, teachers must manage their conflict by whatever means are effective, as long as the principal is not involved.

Thus, conflict avoidance, competition, accommodation, and compromise are used as opposed to the collaborative approach spelled out in R-3.<sup>23</sup> Such strategies result in incidents of teachers ignoring one another, teachers being verbally aggressive or sarcastic, and teachers being dissatisfied about having to give in. These outcomes, however, are preferred to involving the principal in a "petty" conflict.

If the teachers judge the problem to be of "major concern," they are faced with two additional sets of choices--who should present the conflict to the principal and what behaviors should be exhibited in his presence. Because of their dependence on the principal, when making these choices teachers must consider how they can best maintain or enhance their good standing with him. The ways in which they might do this vary according to their power. The behaviors the teachers exhibit are influenced by the following two power considerations: 1) their estimation of the principal's perception of their power, and 2) power differentials between the teachers themselves.

The teachers' good standing with the principal is related to their fulfillment of the master contract. But, as we have seen, the master contract does not offer explicit guidelines for many conflict situations the teachers encounter. Given this, when major conflicts occur, teachers must evaluate the behavioral options available to them based on their relational power.

For example, teachers who believe they are in a low power position have no conflict options available beyond the rules prescribed by the master contract. They are especially vulnerable in terms of job stability. Although the principal has claimed that teachers should feel free to bring a problem of any magnitude to him, these low power teachers, in addition to concealing

"minor problems" (R-8), are aware that they are at risk in bringing any problems to the principal. They cannot afford to allow the principal to see them as unable or unwilling to abide by the master contract rules. Therefore, they will avoid involving the principal in any of their conflicts. This avoidance was reflected in the faculty meeting referred to earlier in which certain teachers failed to voice their dissent in the principal's presence. These teachers, in interview situations, had previously indicated that they saw themselves in a low power position. By violating the master contract rules they would have further jeopardized their standing with the principal.

By contrast, when a major conflict occurs, two teachers who perceive themselves to be in good standing with the principal and of relatively equal power have available to them options beyond the master contract. Having gone through all the procedures of the master contract, if these teachers cannot handle their conflict, they need not conceal it, but will together approach the principal with the problem. Their failure to work out their own conflict (prescribed by R-5) is overlooked because of their success at fulfilling all the other master contract rules and because of their power relationships.

For example, in recounting a conflict about student use of the library, both the librarian and the teacher involved indicated during interviews an initial failure to manage the conflict themselves. These two individuals, both of whom had several years of service at this school and good relationships with the principal, brought the conflict before the principal. With his help, the problem was alleviated. Neither the teacher nor the librarian felt his intervention damaged their status. By presenting themselves as

cooperative, open and "mature," they could seek the principal's mediation in the conflict, but still maintain his perception that they were abiding by the master contract.

Based on these considerations of power derived from teacher comments and from observations, the following rules can be elaborated for people of low or equal power:

R-9: If there is a "major problem" in which the principal should be involved, and if a conflicting teacher believes the principal perceives him/her as low power, then he/she should abide strictly by the master contract and avoid taking the problem to the principal.

R-10: If there is a "major problem" in which the principal should be involved, and if the conflicting teachers believe they are in good standing with the principal and are of relatively equal power, then they should go beyond the master contract by approaching the principal and seeking his intervention.

While Rules 1-8 are obligatory rules whose intended purpose is to prescribe required behavior for all teachers in all of their interactions, Rules 9 and 10 are preferential and relationship-specific. Though preferential rules carry less prescriptive force than obligatory rules, "a person who fails to comply with preferential rules will be viewed less favorably than one who fulfills their prescription."<sup>24</sup> In order to prove the existence of these preferential rules we have only to provide evidence of negative sanctions.<sup>25</sup>

Immediate sanctions such as frowns or verbal reprimands may, and do, result from a violation of Rules 9 and 10. However, the potential long-term sanctions are of greater concern to teachers and thus are more influential in their decision to comply with the rules. While occasional rule violations may not damage the principal's perception of the teacher as an adherent to the master contract, an accumulation of violations over time may lead him to the conclusion that the involved teacher does not fit the organizational image.

The ultimate sanction that teachers fear is involuntary transfer to another school. Anticipating that sanction creates rule compliance. In order to avoid such a sanction teachers must invoke both the explicit and the implicit conflict rules.

While behavior of low power and equal power teachers is guided by these implicit rules, it seems that the regularities in behavior of high power teachers is not rule-generated. According to Shimanoff, sometimes behavioral regularities exist because allowances are made for those of high status to deviate from a rule. In such cases, violation of a rule is not negatively sanctioned.<sup>26</sup> Because of their power, these teachers have a wider range of behavioral options, including even the option of not following the master contract. This rule-allowance behavior is evidenced in teachers violating the rules of cooperation/collaboration and openness, instead approaching the principal unilaterally to discuss an unmanaged conflict he/she is having with another teacher of lower power. For example, one teacher, in describing his reactions to a new teaching partner says:

Teacher: It was difficult to get in sync (with her). I spoke to the principal. . . went to him in confidence to let him know what I felt.

While such behavior violates the master contract rules, even when other teachers become aware of it there seems to be little risk in confiding in the principal about a problem with a teacher of lesser status. Such behavior is expected and accepted:

Teacher: I went (to the principal) to discuss it with him (a problem with two other teachers about scheduling), and then afterwards I told them I had talked to him.

Researcher: Weren't they angry? What happened?

Teacher: No. They changed it as I wanted it.

Thus, it appears that the master contract does not apply equally to all teachers in this school. These findings imply that certain teachers in certain circumstances are immune to the master contract rules. Yet one might speculate about whether or not high power teachers who repeatedly violate the master contract would, over time, lose their power and face long-term negative sanctions similar to the ones described for low power and equal power teachers. These issues, however, are beyond the scope of this study.

### Implications

The results of this study point to several implications related to conducting research in organizations, developing useful theories about organizational communication and about rules, and making use of research and theory in the context of organizational consulting. After considering each of these implications, the need for further research will be addressed.

First, the researcher found that a rules approach from a communicatively-based interpretive perspective provides an effective means of gaining knowledge of an organizational culture. By using a variety of qualitative methods such as interviews, observation, and document analysis, it was possible to infer the rules by which this social collectivity operates. Engaging in a focused, in-depth analysis of the specific communication process of conflict management, the researcher was able to move beyond a superficial understanding of the rules which are most readily apparent to the observer, and arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity inherent in the organizational rules-structure. Having identified rules about how to violate rules and rules which qualify persons and contexts in which certain rules apply or do not apply, the researcher emerged with a

more accurate description of the complex process of conflict management in this organization. Results of this study would indicate that a rules-based approach to the study of organizational communication can be most useful.

A second implication deals with the development of theory related to how organizations function. In doing a rules analysis one must start with a theoretical framework which can, through research, be tested by application to an actual organization. In the process of doing so, that theoretical framework may be refined. In this study, it became evident that, although Harris and Cronen's conceptualization of the master contract is a useful starting point, if we are to use their theory in order to analyze organizations and develop intervention strategies for consultation, as they have suggested we might, it will be necessary to modify or to expand that theory. It appears that the rules which constitute an organization's master contract may not, by themselves, give an accurate picture of the way that organization functions, but instead may represent an unrealistic view of the organization. It is undeniable that the participants in this study are co-oriented to their master contract and that they have stated agreement as to how to coordinate their behaviors, the two prerequisites Harris and Cronen suggest to insure optimal functioning of the organization. Yet, Harris and Cronen's present model fails to take account of participant's behaviors which fall outside the range prescribed by the master contract and which may have a significant impact on the actual functioning of the organization.

In this particular case, since the power-oriented conflict behaviors which are an important reality in any organization are left out of this school's master contract, an analysis of the organization based solely on the master contract would certainly be inadequate. This researcher found it necessary to identify not only the participants' stated rules, but their tacit rules

as well, then to explain how the widely-accepted master contract rules and the implicit power rules influence the behavioral choices of the participants. Thus, in order for Harris and Cronen's theoretical framework to be a useful tool in conducting organizational research, it is necessary to expand their definition of master contract to include the organization's implicit rules as well as the explicit, image-related rules articulated by organizational members.

A third implication relates to the criteria by which we determine rule-existence. As one of the primary means to establishing the criticizability of a rule, negative sanctions have generally been conceptualized and studied as immediate responses to rule violations. If we look only at short term sanctions, however, we may fail to identify significant rules in the particular setting being studied. We might expand our conceptualization of negative sanctions to encompass long-term, cumulative sanctions and recognize that the desire to avoid these anticipated sanctions compels people to comply with rules. Expanding our definition in this way would require longitudinal studies which would enable us to better understand rule emergence.

A final implication relates to the use of research and theory by the organizational consultant. It is clear from this study that conducting research in an organization based on inadequately-developed theory is likely to yield results which are inaccurate. If the consultant's role is to offer evaluations of the organization and to suggest strategies which would enable the organization to achieve optimal functioning, the results of offering those evaluations and suggestions on the basis on inaccurate information could prove unfortunate both for the organization and for the consultant.

In assessing the need for further study, it is clear that additional rules-based research would facilitate the much-needed development of a solid theoretical base from which to conduct organizational research. Further studies based on observations and interpretations of discrepancies between the rules which participants claim to govern their behavior and the rules which actually guide their behavior would be valuable. Knowledge of the evolution of alternative rules-structures from which actors must choose appropriate behavior remains essentially untapped. Though some scholars have addressed the issue of the different contexts in which rules operate,<sup>27</sup> little research effort has been directed at understanding the historical, interpersonal, social or cultural forces which constrain those choices in particular contexts. This paper represents a preliminary effort to consider these forces in the process of rule emergence.

An expansion of the present study to look at conflict rules in other organizational settings might establish some level of generalizability of the present findings in other organizational contexts. In-depth studies of rules related to specific communication processes other than conflict would yield increased understanding of how organizational participants construct their everyday social realities. Finally, further understanding of the interaction between explicit and implicit rules-structures and assessment of the impact of implicit rules on individual behavior and organizational functioning would add to our knowledge of interpersonal and organizational communication.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Michael E. Pacanowsky and Nick O'Donnell-Trujillo, "Communication and Organizational Cultures," The Western Journal of Speech Communication, 46 (1982), 116-117.

<sup>2</sup>E. G. Bormann, "The Application of Symbolic Convergence Communication Theory to Organizations," unpublished manuscript, University of Minnesota, 1.

<sup>3</sup>Leonard Hawes, "Social Collectivities as Communication: Perspective on Organizational Behavior," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 60 (1974), 500.

<sup>4</sup>Linda Harris and Vernon E. Cronen, "A Rules-Based Model for the Analysis and Evaluation of Organizational Communication," Communication Quarterly, 27 (1979); Charlene Edna O'Brien, "A Rules-Based Approach to Communication Within a Formal Organization: Theory and Case Studies," unpublished dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1978.

<sup>5</sup>Joyce Hocker and William W. Wilmot, Interpersonal Conflict (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1978), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>Terrance L. Albrecht and Vickie A. Ropp, "The Study of Network Structuring in Organizations through the Use of Method Triangulation," The Western Journal of Speech Communication, 46 (1982), 163.

<sup>7</sup>Afzalur Rahim and Thomas V. Bonoma, "Managing Organizational Conflict: A Model for Diagnosis and Intervention," Psychological Reports, 44 (1979); Patricia A. Renwick, "Perception and Management of Superior-Subordinate Conflict," Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 13 (1975).

<sup>8</sup>Harris and Cronen.

<sup>9</sup>Susan B. Shimanoff, "Identifying Rule-Related Behavior," paper presented at the Western Speech Communication Association Convention, February, 1979, 32. Shimanoff suggests that when rules which guide the communicator's behavior differ from the governing rules, the researcher should compare the two sets of rules to determine the source of difference.

<sup>10</sup>Susan B. Shimanoff, Communication Rules: Theory and Research (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc., 1980), p. 57.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 91-103.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 76-83.

<sup>13</sup>Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo, 112-113.

<sup>14</sup>Harris and Cronen, 17.

<sup>15</sup>Janice Hocker Rushing, "Synthesizing Perspectives: Students and Teachers in Qualitative Research," unpublished manuscript, University of Colorado, 10-17. For example, using the tactic of "manipulation through disorientation," one person may catch another off guard by enacting an episode which, being inconsistent with the formal rule relationship, constitutes a rule violation. Because the discomfort in the other creates dependence on the rule violator to alleviate tension, the relational power of the rule violator is enhanced.

<sup>16</sup>Hocker and Wilmot, 6-7.

<sup>17</sup>Herbert Simons, "Persuasion in Social Conflicts: A Critique of Prevailing Conceptions and a Framework for Future Research," Speech Monographs, 39 (1972), 227-247.

<sup>18</sup>Hocker and Wilmot, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup>A. Rahim, "The Management of Intraorganizational Conflicts: A Laboratory Study with Organization Design," Management International Review, 19 (1979), 97; Brent D. Ruben, "Communication and Conflict: A System-Theoretic Perspective," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (1978), 206. While Rahim posits that "more recently it has become accepted that tension is normal, even desirable," and that "'healthy' personalities actually seek to increase tension," Ruben discusses the positive function of conflict in protecting against stagnation.

<sup>20</sup>Because of the anonymity assured to the school under study the title and authorship of this document is not included here.

<sup>21</sup>Richard M. Emerson, "Power-Dependence Relations," American Sociological Review, 27 (1962), 46.

<sup>22</sup>Hocker and Wilmot, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup>Hocker and Wilmot, pp. 27-32. The authors describe five conflict styles outlined by Thomas and Kilbourn--collaboration, competition, accommodation, avoidance and compromise.

<sup>24</sup>Shimanoff, Communication Rules: Theory and Research, p. 92.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 91-101. The criteria of controllability and contextuality are clearly met here. Since participants do offer judgments of appropriateness and inappropriateness of behavior, this, in conjunction with negative sanctions, establishes criticizability.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Frenetz and Thomas Farrell, "Language Action: A Paradigm for Communication," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (1976), 333-349.